

## **Imperialism:** Superpower dominance, malignant and benign.

*By Christopher Hitchens, from slate.com*

The United States is not supposed, in its own self-image, to be an empire. (Nor is it supposed, in its own self-image, to have a class system—but there you go again.) It began life as a rebel colony and was in fact the first colony to **depose** British rule. When founders like Alexander Hamilton spoke of a coming American "empire," they arguably employed the word in a classical and metaphorical sense, speaking of the future **dominion** over the rest of the continent. By that standard, Lewis and Clark were the originators of American "imperialism." Anti-imperialists of the colonial era would not count as such today. That old radical Thomas Paine was forever at Jefferson's elbow, urging that the United States become a superpower for democracy. He hoped that America would destroy the old European empires.

This perhaps shows that one should beware of what one wishes for because, starting in 1898, the United States *did* destroy or subvert all of the European empires. It took over Cuba and the Philippines from Spain (we still hold Puerto Rico as a "colony" in consequence) and after 1918 decided that if Europe was going to be **quarrelsome** and **destabilizing**, a large American navy ought to be built on the model of the British one. Franklin Roosevelt spent the years 1939 to 1945 steadily extracting British bases and colonies from Winston Churchill, from the Caribbean to West Africa, in exchange for wartime assistance. Within a few years of the end of World War II, the United States was the **regnant** or decisive power in what had been the Belgian Congo, the British Suez Canal Zone, and—most **ominously** of all—French Indochina. Dutch Indonesia and Portuguese Angola joined the list in due course. Meanwhile, under the “anti-imperial” Monroe Doctrine, Washington considered Central America and everything due south of it to be America's special province. In general, what was created was a system of proxy rule, by way of

client states and dependent regimes. And few dared call it imperialism. Indeed, the most **militant** defenders of the policy greatly resented the term, which seemed to echo **leftist propaganda**.

Unlike the Romans or the British, Americans are simultaneously the supposed **guarantors** of a system of international law and doctrine. It was on American initiative that every member nation of the United Nations was obliged to subscribe to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Innumerable treaties and instruments, descending and ramifying from this, are still binding legally and morally. Thus, for the moment, the word "unilateralism" is doing **idiomatic** duty for the word "imperialism," as signifying a hyper-power or ultra-power that wants to be exempted from the rules because—well, because it wrote most of them.

However, the plain fact remains that when the rest of the world wants anything done in a hurry, it applies to American power. If the "Europeans" or the United Nations had been left with the task, the European provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo would now be howling wildernesses, Kuwait would be the 19th province of a Greater Iraq, and Afghanistan might still be under Taliban rule. In at least the first two of the above cases, it can't even be argued that American imperialism was the problem in the first place. This makes many of the critics of this imposing new order sound like the whimpering, resentful Judean subversives in *The Life of Brian*, squabbling among themselves about "What have the Romans ever done for us?"

I **fervently** wish that as much energy was being expended on the coming Ethiopian famine or the coming Central Asian drought as on the pestilence of Saddam Hussein. But, if ever we can leave the Saddams and Milosevics and Kim Jong-ils behind and turn to greater questions, you can bet that the bulk of the airlifting and distribution and innovation and construction will be done by Americans, including the new **nexus** of human-rights and humanitarian **NGOs** who play rather

the same role in this **imperium** that the missionaries did in the British one (though to far more creditable effect).

A condition of the new imperialism will be the specific promise that while troops will come, they will not stay too long. An associated promise is that the era of the client state is gone and that the aim is to enable local populations to govern themselves. This promise is sincere. A new standard is being proposed, and one to which our rulers can and must be held. In other words, if the United States will dare to declare out loud for empire, it had better be in its capacity as a Thomas Paine **arsenal**, or at the very least a Jeffersonian one. And we may also need a new word for it.

Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) was a columnist for *Vanity Fair* and the author, most recently, of *Arguably*, a collection of essays.